

The Pheasant Island

A threshold in Time

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Synopsis

This project investigates the intersection between border territories and collective memory and their roles in defining architecture within the human-built environment. It addresses the gaps in understanding how different architectural tools and its implications perform the human spirit of drawing division lines in time.

I examine the condominium agreement as a novel form of border division. The case study will be on Pheasant Island, with the goal to delve deeper into how the condominium works, how time shifts work in this context, and how it was applied and can be applied in various contested contexts.

My fieldwork on Pheasant Island is rather singular since this condominium is not only the oldest and smallest in the world but also the only one where the sovereignty is not shared simultaneously but alternately. It is a very symbolic place for both countries, even nowadays; however, there is a lack of public knowledge and material about how this island works and the reasons behind this rare example.

Key words: Border, threshold, collective memory, contested, condominium

1. Borders.

In a border space, the physical space intersects with quandaries of flow, control, identity, belonging, memories, and collective imaginings. The scale of such quandaries ranges from geopolitical to the intimate human identity. The project takes a starting point with these quandaries to explore how the border can be understood as a symbol and a memory for a country or a society. The physical border becomes a souvenir of what the border means, has meant, and will mean.

2. The Pheasant Island. A unique case study.

Pheasant Island, Isla de Los Faisanes in Spanish, or Île de la Conference in French, is a 2000 m² island located in the Bidasoa River that divides France from Spain in the western part of their border area.

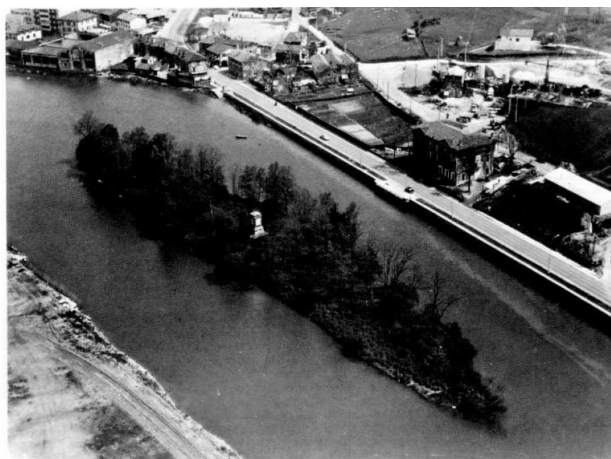


Fig. A¹

This island is a unique example of a rare border arrangement: a condominium. A condominium is a territory jointly administered by two or more countries, often (but not necessarily) a territory on the common border between the parties involved. As one might imagine, such an arrangement depends on the benevolent cooperation of all parties involved, and indeed, historically, most condominiums have not survived very long. What makes Pheasant Island unique is that it is the oldest and smallest condominium in the world and also the only one where the sovereignty is not shared simultaneously but alternately. Every six months, a ceremony takes place on the island, where the military forces from Spain and France exchange the sovereignty of the island for half of the year.

3. Story of the Island and the first Royal Encounter.

The story of the island as a shared territory started in 1659 when Spain and France used it as a meeting point to sign the Treaty of the Pyrenees that finished the 1635-1659 war (also called the 100 Years' War) between the countries. This extraordinary event for the two nations finished the most protracted conflict

¹ Around 1970. Pheasant Island (Spain/France)

between them but also opened a new phase in their relations. A year after, in 1660 Louis XIV from France and Maria Teresa de Austria from the Spanish Crown got engaged on the same island to ratify the treaty.

4. The first Royal Encounter.

This crucial event is immortalized in several pieces of art and cartographic en-graves all around Europe. With them, a narrative started around the sacral character of the island. Moreover, in consequence, not only the geographical space but also, the ceremonial actions around this event that included the preparation and buildings that hosted the engagement. One of the most interesting documents recreating the Island for the Royal is the one I found at the Military Archives of Stockholm. It is an old depiction from the 17th century, and it depicts the building that was constructed for the wedding and the "delivery" of the infant Mara Teresa de Austria to Louis XIV.

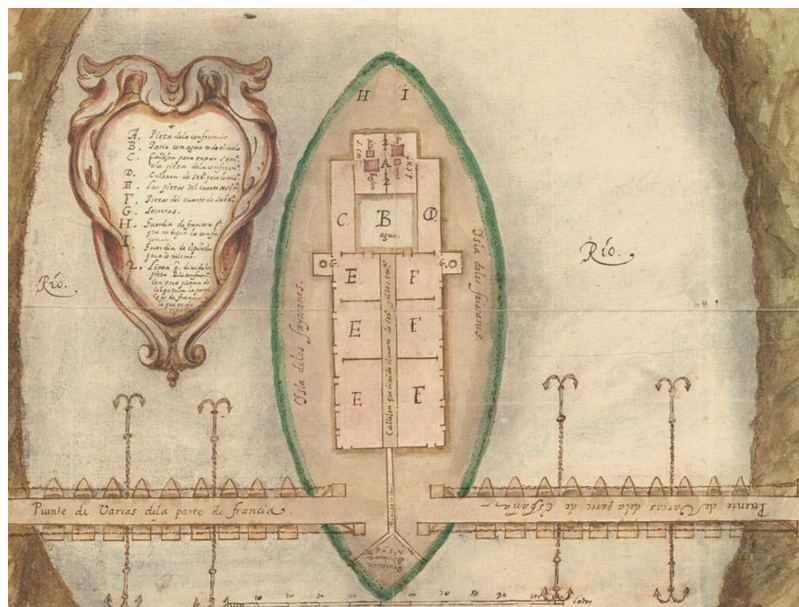


Fig. B²

It is a symmetric building in which the space is divided into several chambers as a processional encounter device. The members of both countries' courts would cross each room separately until they arrived at the last one where both retinues would greet each other.

This depiction is just one of the many representations of this event, and the building was specially designed for the encounter. Many sources state that

Diego Velazquez—from Spain—and Charles Le Brun—from France—were responsible for decorating the structure.³

² Anonymus. Utländska Krigsplaner. Kriget mellan Frankrike och Spanien 1635-1659. Nr. 30^a. Krigsarkivet, Stockholm (Sweden)

³ Sáinz, Luis Ignacio. (2006). La isla de los faisanes: Diego de Velázquez y Felipe IV Reflexiones sobre las representaciones políticas. Argumentos (México, D.F.), 19(51), 147-167.

It is fascinating to analyse how this building is represented in very different shapes and sizes in various artistic representations but always retains the location of an island that is reached from two sides (two countries) by two bridges. It is a symmetrical composition for a mirrored encounter space between two national powers. All these representations started a common imaginary image of the island which; we do not know how it looked, or if it even existed in the way it was depicted, but this representation has been used as part of the creation of the collective memory of the physical space.

On the other hand, one of the essential pictures of the encounter is a piece from a tapestry series depicting the life of Louis XIV by Charles Le Brun located in the Palace of Versailles. The one that portrays the engagement agreement on the island was later replicated as an oil painting by Jacques Laumosnier, which is now at the Musée de Tessé in Le Mans (Figure C)⁴. The importance of the event, becomes evident by the identification of the people depicted in the picture.

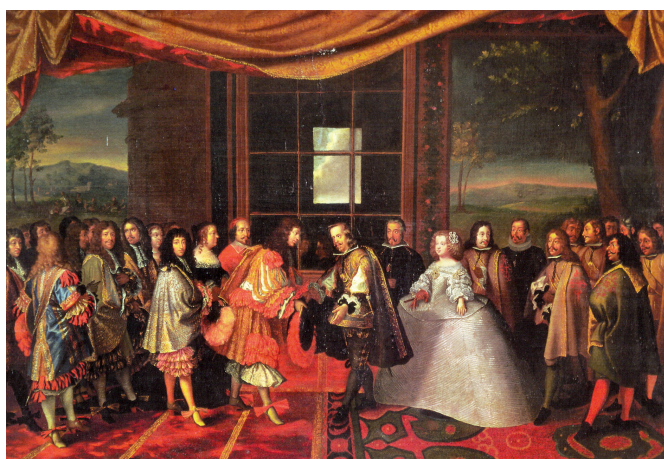


Fig. C⁴

Jumping a couple of centuries in time, another treaty was also signed during the 19th Century by Isabella II of Spain, in Bayonne, not far from the Island place. It set the border between France and Spain as it exists to the present day and mentioned the Pheasant Island and its jurisdiction.⁵

5. Becoming of the myth.

Since the signature of this last treaty, the Island has become a particular “Persephone” for both countries that exchange the island’s sovereignty every six months⁵. Consequently, this island has gained great symbolic value for both countries. The island has developed its own story as a symbol and a memory. All the historical and highly symbolic events have turned it into a collective creation, and nowadays, these memories have become the real identity of the island—it is no longer only a physical space; the physical space is the souvenir of the real identity.

⁴ Jacques Laumosnier. End of XVII century. Oil painting. Musée de Tessé. Le Mans (France)

⁵ Bayonne Treaty 1856. Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid (Spain)

The continuous ritual exchange of the island and its inaccessibility to the public testifies to the almost sacral status of the physical space of the island in the imaginary countries.

During the last decades, its symbolic value has been continuously increasing, with the use of its image and name as a symbol of peace, reconciliation, and understanding between the two countries and with the use of the island's image in coins or postcards.

6. The physical space and the collective imagination.

The island is made of sand, and its location in the river mouth⁶ has made it vulnerable to floods and other natural events.

I found the final document, which confirmed the idea that the physical island no longer exists, in the Public Archives of Irún.

In 1969, Spain developed a project called: "Project of reparation and conservation of the Pheasant Island."⁶ The plans that I found at the archive show how the actual island was built from an existing sandbank in the river. The mainland of the island was confined and retained by big rocks, and then, two processional and ceremonial stairs were created toward the shores on the French and the Spanish side.

This project is tremendously interesting because it reflects the technical background of how to build a physical representation of a myth at a one-to-one scale in a geopolitical level.

Even more explicit in this sense is also the archive project by the architect Sainz de Vicuña in 1970 (Figure E)⁷, which was never realized.

The architect proposed a museum of the Franco-Hispanic common history. From the analysis of the archive material, we can understand how the creative process started from an engraving from the 17th century (Figure D)⁸, taking it as granted and as the real form of the historical island and building. The footprint of the new museum would follow that image and then transform and reshape according to the needs of a modern museum in 1970.

⁶ Proyecto de reforma y conservación de la Isla de los Faisanes. Irún, April 1969. Public Archive of Irún. Urbanism Department.

⁷ Proposal April 1970 by Sainz de Vicuña. Courtesy of Sainz de Vicuña family archive

⁸ Engraving by Bouttats, Gaspar, 1690. Vienna (Austria)

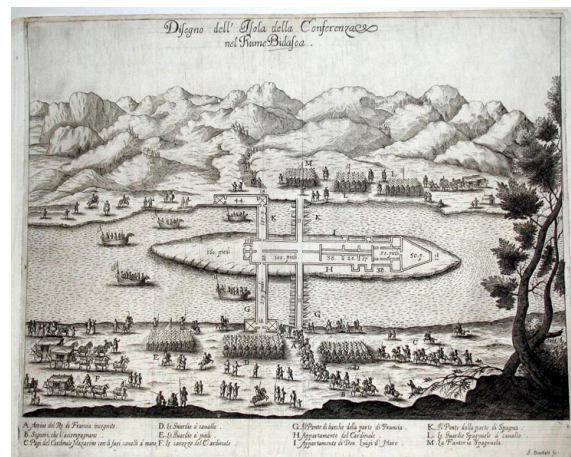


Fig. D¹⁰

Here, there is a big image issue regarding how an image created in the 17th century can influence the collective memory and collective image of a symbol or a myth.

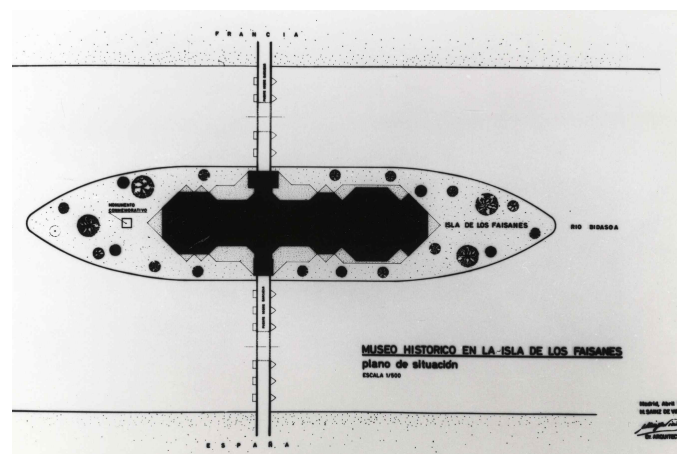


Fig. E⁷

This process is somehow parallel to the one that took place after the Austrian architect Fischer von Erlach released *A Plan of Civil and Historic Architecture*⁹ in 1721 in the sense that this book was supposed to be an investigation of the world's architecture by depicting different monuments around the world. By depicting existing buildings, but also fictional buildings from far cultures, regardless of the accuracy of the picture, this book changed the notions of reality and architecture in the European context.

It looks paradoxical in the case of the island, the way the made-up physical space of the island is shared and exchanged every six months even nowadays by the military forces of both countries. Somehow, it is a very poetic representation of how borders are entirely artificial and just man-created.

After all this analysis, it became evident that the current physical formation of the island is only a souvenir or a representation of the physical space where

⁹ Von Erlach, Fischer Guy. *A Plan of Civil and Historic Architecture*. (Gale ECCO, Print Editions 2010)

symbolic events took place. Thus, the true nature of the island is imaginary.



Fig.G¹⁰

¹⁰ Voigländer CLR. Kodak ISO 200.. By Guillermo S Arsuaga

Nous sommes matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être nous sommes
 On est matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être
 Nous sommes matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être
 On est matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être
 Nous sommes matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être
 On est matière vivante humaine dans un espace contesté et adapté et adopté pour être
 Nous sommes matière vivante humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 On est matière vivante humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 Nous sommes matière vivante humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 On est matière vivante et humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 Nous sommes matière vivante et humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 On est matière vivante et humaine quand je suis un autre et je suis nous autres
 Nous sommes matière
 On est matière
 Nous sommes
 On est
 Somos.
 Somos materia.
 Somos materia y viviente.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana cuando soy un-otro.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana cuando soy uno-otro.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana cuando soy uno-otro y soy nos-otros.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana en un medio en disputa.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana en un medio en disputa adaptado.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana en un medio en disputa adaptado y adoptado.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana en un medio en disputa adaptado y adoptado para ser.
 Somos materia y viviente y humana en un medio en disputa adaptado y adoptado para ser, somos.

Fig. H¹¹



Fig. I¹²

¹¹ Poem part of the exhibition Mindepartamentet- Stockholm. Spring 2017. By Guillermo S Arsuaga

¹² Instalation part of the exhibition Mindepartamentet- Stockholm. Spring 2017. By Guillermo S Arsuaga

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Biography

Sanchez Arsuaga, Guillermo is an architect and a researcher working with social issues related to borders, contested fronts, collective memory and imagination. Arsuaga is based in Stockholm, where he practices architecture and completes his research training at the Royal Institute of Art. In his work Arsuaga combines architectural perspectives to various art media.